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ABSTRACT

A sample of 218 black low-income mothers is used to investigate the mothers' perception of their need for family life and sex education for their entire family, attitude toward public school, family life and sex education, and the concept of the population crisis. This study focuses on low income families because this population has been most affected by lack of family life education and sex education, given the negative value placed on large unplanned families, unstable homes, and generations of poverty in the U.S. The findings reveal that mothers are willing to support family life and sex education classes for themselves and their children. The association between sex information and sex experimentation is unrelated when controlled by age and level of education. Other findings are that small families are becoming popular and that participation in a family planning clinic significantly influences the small family concept. Mothers in the study who indicate a willingness to attend a family life and sex education class are significantly younger and have fewer children than mothers who indicate 'no' to sex and family life education. (Author/AM)

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Family Life and Sex Education Among Low-Income Families

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PERCEPTION OF THE NEED FOR FAMILY LIFE AND SEX EDUCATION AMONG LOW-INCOME MOTHERS

by

*Martha McClenny Conley

(ABSTRACT)

A sample of 218 mothers was used to investigate low income mothers perception of family life and sex education. Four factors were examined. They were concerned with mother's attitude toward (1) a need for family life and sex education, (2) family life and sex education for the entire family, (3) family life and sex information in the public school, and (4) the population crises phenomenon. The findings revealed that mothers were willing to support family life and sex education classes for themselves and for their children. The association between sex information and sex experimentation was unrelated when controlled by age and level of education. Additional findings revealed that small families are becoming popular and participation in a family planning clinic significantly influenced the small family concept. Mothers in the study, who indicated a willingness to attend a family life and sex education class, were significantly younger and had fewer children than mothers who indicated "no" to sex and family life education.

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Family Life and Sex Education Among Low-Income Families

This research was to investigate low-income mother's perception and need for family life and sex education. Numerous studies have been made which reveal why low-income families have high birth rates, unstable homes, and remain in poverty. However, it has been shown that poor women want about the same number of children as most other American women, but poor women generally have more children than the average middle-class woman, and also, the low-income woman is likely to marry earlier or have an illegitimate child, have children born closer together, and bear children over a longer period of time than women of the middle and upper-income groups (Westoff and Westoff, 1971).

The proposition that poor people want many children because it makes them happy, that they have nothing better to do, or that it demonstrates the husband's virility are still assumptions held by some people as noted by Stycos and Back (1964). However, it appears more obvious that once a family life style is established in a given family, it is difficult to break the pattern unless educational measures are offered. The parents are the role models for their children. They are the first to teach communication patterns, establish interpersonal relations, orient the child toward society, and help the child develop a sense of self-esteem. Parents who are uneducated, or functionally illiterate, and have been discriminated against, can hardly be expected to transfer positive attitudes to their children toward society. Havighurst (1960) has called

for "heroic action" to meet the problems of children from inadequate homes characterized by ignorance, rejection, or neglect.

Family life education along with sex education, could help families to discover the approach of the stable family concept. Neiman (1971) has held that "life skills" taught in family life education classes are just as important to personal development as are language and the sciences. He also noted that many people have married, and more will continue to marry, not knowing how to manage themselves and their families.

Marriage and family educators hold that couples need a frame of reference upon which to base their behavior. Some families will utilize, though not in a self-conscious manner, the fictitious couples who appear in popular magazines, such as True Story and True Confessions and in television serials. Some years ago, a survey by Herzog (1946) of why people listened to radio soap operas revealed that: "Many in the audience hoped to obtain advice which would help them solve their own problems."

While some families may use fictitious families, others utilize their own family of orientation as a reference. The essential point here is that families use some sources of reference to guide their daily behavior. Do they want family life education to be left to chance or learned through effective educational methods?

This study examined the low-income mother"s:

(1) Conception of her own need for family life education; family life education for her children and entire family.

(2) Willingness to play a role in teaching family life and sex education to her children.

(3) Degree of acceptance in allowing the public school to teach family life and sex education to her children.

Family life educators define family life education as a body of knowledge which includes what we know, feel, and do as family members. The primary aim of sex education is a body of knowledge to help each individual understand himself as a sexual being in the total sense, and to use that knowledge in a responsible manner. Sex Education will also provide knowledge and develop attitudes which will raise the standards of home life, and enable people of all ages to live more constructively as members of a family and other groups.

During the survey, when asked to define family life education, less than half of the mothers did not adequately define family life education or sex education. However, it was the opinion of the majority that these topics should be included in the majority that these topics should be included in the public school curriculum, and taught to their children. (See table 1 and 2)

Definitions of sex education were divided into four major responses--"Educating young people about sex, "male-female relationships," "courtship, contraceptives", "having babies and disease."

Mothers' definition of family life education were divided into several categories. Of the respondents, 32 percent defined family life as "living with my family", 17 percent as "managing and caring for my family." 15 percent indicated, "don't know, the remaining 36 percent chose other responses, (See Table 1 and 2).

Even though mothers were not fully aware of the concept, family life education, they expressed a desire to attend a family life education class if available in their area. They indicated that family life and sex education would be beneficial to their children if taught in the public school. (See Table 3, 4, 5)

TABLE 1

DEFINITION OF FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

DESCRIBED BY LEVEL OF RESPONDENTS' EDUCATION

Responses (in Respondents' Words)	Total N %
Living with my family	65 (32)
Managing and caring for my family	37 (17)
Getting along together	23 (11)
Learning how to live in harmony with different people	8 (3)
Teaching family how to cooperate and understand each other	14 (7)
Teaching respect	12 (6)
Better relationship between husband wife, parentchild	9 (4)
Children learning to obey parents	3 (1)
Never been taught	12 (6)
Don't know	35 (15)
Total	218

TABLE 2

DEFINITION OF SEX EDUCATION DESCRIBED
BY LEVEL OF RESPONDENTS' EDUCATION

Responses (in Respondents' words)	8 or less N	9 or more N	Total N%
Educating young people about sex	13	17	30 (15)
Teaching about boy meet girl and respect for each other	0	6	6 (2)
Love, honesty	4	5	9 (4)
Feeling and desire for one another	5	5	10 (5)
Understanding life	1	8	9 (4)
Awareness of sex	6	3	9 (4)
Male-Female relations	9	27	36 (18)
Courtship, contraceptives, having babies	2	26	28 (13)
Sexual intercourse and having babies	14	21	35 (17)
Changes in the body and sex organs	1	10	11 (5)
Refuse to discuss	5	4	9 (4)
Never studied	0	5	5 (2)
Don't know	11	10	21 (10)
Total	71	147	218

TABLE 3

WILL ATTENDING A FAMILY LIFE OR SEX EDUCATION CLASS

N=213 Age	Yes N (%)	Family Life Education No N (%)	Total N (%)
16-26	35 (16)	8 (4)	42 (20)
27-31	51 (24)	5 (2)	56 (26)
32-41	61 (29)	11 (5)	72 (34)
42-61	33 (15)	10 (5)	43 (20)
Total	179 (84)	34 (16)	213 (100)

N=209 Age	Yes N (%)	Sex Education No N (%)	Total N (%)
16-21	20 (9)	21 (10)	41 (19)
27-31	31 (15)	23	54 (26)
32-41	41 (20)		72 (35)
42-61	20 (10)	22 (10)	42 (20)
Total	112 (54)	97 (46)	209 (100)

TABLE 4
RESPONDENTS' DESIRE FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL SEX EDUCATION AND FAMILY LIFE

EDUCATION FOR THEIR CHILDREN BY AGE OF RESPONDENT

N=208	Sex Education		
Age	Yes N (%)	No N (%)	Total N (%)
Under 21	11 (5)	2 (1)	13 (6)
21-30	64 (31)	18 (7)	82 (38)
31-40	49 (26)	22 (11)	71 (37)
Over 40	19 (9)	23 (11)	42 (19)

N=212	Family Life Education		
Age	Yes N (%)	No N (%)	Total N (%)
Under 21	8 (3)	4 (2)	12 (5)
21-30	75 (35)	9 (4)	84 (39)
31-40	63 (30)	11 (6)	74 (36)
Over 40	32 (15)	10 (5)	42 (20)
Total	178 (83)	34 (17)	212 (100)

TABLE 5
MOTHER S' WILLINGNESS TO ATTEND CLASS ON FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

N=216 Age	Responses: Most Likely N (%)	Not likely or undecided N	(%)
Below 21	6 (3)	7	(3)
21-30	67 (31)	19	(8)
31-40	48 (22)	27	(14)
Over 40	22 (10)	20	(9)
	143 (66)	73	(33)

Kind of Class	N	(%)
Class with speaker	96	(44)
Small Group Discussion	52	(24)
Small Parent Groups	26	(12)
Movie	44	(20)
Total	218	(100)

This survey to low income mothers tends to confirm the Liebow and Blood (1967-1962) report that most Americans count among their most important aspirations a satisfying family life - to marry wisely, to stay happily married, and perform the notes involved in parenthood lovingly. To achieve this goal, it might seem logical to conclude that family planning advice, in conjunction with family life and sex education, is very important to a meaningful family life and sex education, is very important to a meaningful family relationship.

Families who are taught to work together, make decisions together, thereby developing interpersonal relationships within the family and community, can be an asset to themselves and the society at large. Adams (1970) noted that it is important to help families realize the necessity of involvement and commitment to a community. Of the mothers in this family life survey, the majority, 69 percent, indicated that they did, not attend any club or organizational meetings. It was concluded that the mothers were not active in the community, but would become involved if the opportunity existed. It must be noted that 66 percent indicated a desire to attend a family life education class.

In a report prepared by Insko, (1971) after an experimental study of a group of 15 couples who attend a family life education workshop, behavioral changes were recorded. Changes recorded were increased openess in communication between husband and wife, and parent and child, gains in empathetic behavior and growth in understanding

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human development. Endress (1968) noted positive changes in attitudes and behavior of parents through participation in family living discussion groups. Parents, for example, become more aware of their children's physical and emotional needs. Barclay (1969) reported similar findings in an approach to meet the needs of unwed mothers. Parents also become aware of community projects to help their children in areas of social adjustment and development.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The major objective of the present study was to investigate black low-income mothers' perceptions related to family life education, sex education and the population crises. Most studies concerned with family life and sex education programs have neglected groups of persons who are most likely to be affected by inadequate preparation in family life and sex education. This study focused on low-income families because it was felt that this population has been most affected by lack of family life education and sex education, given the negative value placed on large unplanned families, unstable homes and generations of poverty in the United States.

The study of societal members in general is significant for establishing a definite need for family life and sex education (Somerville, 1971). However, the needs of low-income families are critical in predicting the desired results of such programs, since they are directly affected by poverty and inadequate educational preparation. The population consisted of 218 black mothers from Southampton County and the cities of Roanoke, Hampton, and Newport News, Virginia.

In the present study mothers' perception of their need for family life and sex education for their entire family, mothers' attitude toward public school family life and sex education, and concept of the population crises were examined. Eighty-four percent of the mothers responded, "yes, family life education would help me to become a better

parent, " and fifty four percent responded, "yes" to the need for sex education. Subjects agreed that the public school should teach sex education and family life education to their children, but were uncertain of the subject matter to be taught. Mothers, significantly agreed that sex education would not influence sex experimentation by youth.

The data indicated that age and number of children influenced the mother's response to questions related to sex education. Mothers in the 21-30 years old category tended to be more accepting of sex education in the public school than mothers in the 21-30 years old category tended to be more accepting of sex education in the public school than mothers in the under 20 years of age category and the over 40 years of age group.

The present study was of an exploratory nature for which hypotheses were not formulated. A future task may be to conduct further inquiries, set up experimental model classes, and compare mothers who have attend such classes. It is the writer's conclusion, based on the results of the study that low-income mothers with small families would attend a family planning clinic, and family life and sex education classes if shown that it would help them to become better parents.

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